

Keith Ernst: DCMA's Man on the Run



An Interview with Mr. Keith Ernst, Acting Director, DCMA,
by Mr. Tom Gelli, Chief, Congressional Affairs, DCMA Headquarters

Last January, barely three months after settling in as the Agency's new deputy director, Mr. Keith D. Ernst was suddenly tapped to serve as Defense Contract Management Agency (DCMA) acting director, a position he likely will hold until a new military flag officer comes on board. Having served at all levels of the organization, including stints at both District Headquarters, Mr. Ernst is particularly well-suited to clutch the throttle for as long as necessary. A former Marine pilot who flew F-4s, this married father of three is well-recognized within the Agency as an ardent and knowledgeable advocate of performance-based management. And as his long list of completed marathons attests, Mr. Ernst is one guy who is most assuredly in it for the long run.

Communicator (C): You have served in prominent positions at DCMA field offices, Districts West and East and now Headquarters. What kind of perspective has emerged over those 23 years?

KE: Certainly the one constant I have seen and continue to see across the Agency is the dedication of our people and what they are trying to accomplish for our customers. Be it in Twin Cities, Seattle, Carson, Boston or here in Alexandria, almost everyone is focused on achieving identified outcomes. That said, I must add that what is changing rapidly is the perception of what those outcomes should be and of what approach we need to take to achieve them. In the past handful of years, we have charted a good



course toward that end — first under [Army] Brig. Gen. [Edward] Harrington and then refined under [Air Force] Maj. Gen. [Darryl] Scott. They have drawn up a roadmap that enables us to identify what's really important to our customers and to hold ourselves accountable for achieving it.

C: Many in DCMA believe you are the chief visionary and architect of the Agency's ongoing realignment. Is that an accurate perception?

KE: No, I can't say I'm the singular force behind it. The realignment is really the composite of many good ideas that various individuals shared with me during my stints at the District Headquarters. The only thing I can take credit for is having recognized the merit of those ideas and being in a position to effectively advocate them. I don't consider myself a grand purveyor of original ideas. However, I have been able to tap into the ideas and enthusiasm of many of our field commanders and to grasp what they and many of our customers were saying.

(Above) Mr. Keith D. Ernst, DCMA acting director, at DCMA Headquarters in Alexandria, Va. (DCMA staff photo)

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In particular, customers were encouraging — in some cases, demanding — us to make product skills and improved accountability key parts of the mix. Now, it’s simply a matter of bringing all that together, and we have some extremely talented and dedicated individuals doing just that on our realignment integrated process teams. They are the ones who deserve the credit. I remain fortunate to be in a position to be a catalyst and proponent, but I’m certainly not the architect or visionary.

C: So, the realignment was not conceived strictly within the Agency?

KE: Correct. Actually, much of the impetus came from customers. Several years ago we were planning to do some efficiency consolidations, whereby we would take a stand-alone activity and roll it into an existing geographic-based organization. A senior-level customer came to me and, essentially, told me that was the wrong way to go. He was concerned that such a geographic-based paradigm would erode product focus and lead to gaps in the skill sets needed to support particular types of technical operations and manufacturing facilities. In taking a second look at the situation, we consulted with other major customers who helped point us in the right direction. So, while it is fair to say the broad concept was home-grown, many of the follow-on ideas that helped shape the final blueprint came from external sources.

C: Do you expect two of the four Product Divisions to be headquartered at locations other than Boston and Carson?

KE: We’re looking at that right now. I’ve asked Mr. [Bob] Schmitt and Ms. [Patricia] Kirk-McAlpine to put together teams to analyze and identify the most appropriate and advisable locations. Three factors are most likely to drive the decisions: accessibility to contract management offices, accessibility to customers and accessibility to DCMA Headquarters. With that said, I don’t

want people to become overly concerned about the possibility of having to relocate to another part of the country. We are earnestly looking at options for allowing our people to operate in more of a virtual mode, especially for folks whose jobs can be performed at places other than in the shadow of the flagpole.

C: How would you describe your management style?

KE: I try to be participatory, but I must confess that I don’t always succeed at it. Sometimes my awareness of the importance of a timely decision and of certain customer concerns causes me to jump to a faster track. If the participatory approach isn’t moving things along fast enough, I tend to switch over — at times, I’m told, prematurely — to a more directive style.

C: Over the past 20 years, who have been some of your favorite management gurus? Is your style patterned after any of them?

KE: I can’t say that I’ve knowingly adopted anyone’s style, but I will say there are dozens of good books out there that offer useful insights. Among them are *Good to Great* by Jim Collins, *Execution* by Larry Bossidy and Ram Charan and *The One-Minute Manager* by Ken Blanchard. Those and other books like them are good, but they are not in and of themselves a collective guide to becoming a good and effective organizational leader. In my case, those books have simply complemented what I have learned from a number of people I have had the good fortune of working with over the past 20 years at every stop along the way. I think if you go into a new work situation or environment with a receptive mind, one that is ready to observe and learn from leaders in your daily experience, you can’t help but improve your own style and effectiveness. And I would hope that I have done just that.

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C: Which historical figure would you like to invite to your Fourth of July backyard cookout?

KE: I think that would be Thomas Jefferson. Not only was he a principal draftsman of the Constitution, but he was the one who really changed the course of the young Nation. He sponsored the Lewis and Clark expeditions and made possible the Louisiana Purchase. He was a true visionary, though perhaps a reluctant one, who opened the country to the western part of the continent. He saw the possibilities and pursued them.

C: It's no secret that the DCMA workforce is getting on in years. What steps are you advocating for attracting and retaining good people?

KE: The projected retirement bow wave is a valid concern that we are addressing, and I think we have some good partial answers. The Keystone Program will remain an effective conduit for bringing on board and developing functional specialists and future leaders. I believe we also will step up efforts to recruit military veterans who know and understand our customers and who have been involved with our business, even if just on the periphery. Additionally, our expanding role in contingency operations is spurring us to develop a strong emergency-essential cadre and retain a versatile forward-deployed military presence capable of providing needed leadership for contingency contract administration. And one final point I must make is that we are well aware that a number of the Agency's leaders will be retiring in the next five years, making it imperative that we begin immediately to groom and prepare a new generation of leaders to take the helm.

C: Given your Minnesota roots ... Twins or Vikings?

KE: Both. But I must confess, I'm a bit of a fair-weather fan.

C: Bob Dylan or Prince?

KE: Actually, neither is high on my list.

C: Hubert Humphrey or Jesse Ventura?

KE: [laughter] I think a combination of the two. I'd take the Midwestern gentility of Hubert Humphrey and combine it with the bold, say-what's-on-your-mind style of Jesse Ventura.

C: Sinclair Lewis or Garrison Keillor?

KE: Sinclair Lewis was a little before my time, so I'll say Garrison Keillor and his popular wisdom — or unpopular wisdom, depending on your point of view. He seems to connect with a lot of people and not just Minnesotans.

C: Since your arrival at Headquarters last October, you've had several face-to-face discussions with DCMA's boss at the Pentagon, Mr. Ken Krieg. What are his perceptions of and expectations for DCMA?

KE: Mr. Krieg has a very favorable opinion of DCMA, our performance and the value we bring to the customers. That being said, he also has some very high expectations in terms of our persevering down the path of performance-based management. In that context, we must understand what our customers need from us and hold ourselves accountable for achieving those outcomes. It is important to know that what we in DCMA are doing with performance-based management is 100 percent aligned with Mr. Krieg's expectations. We will continue down that path.

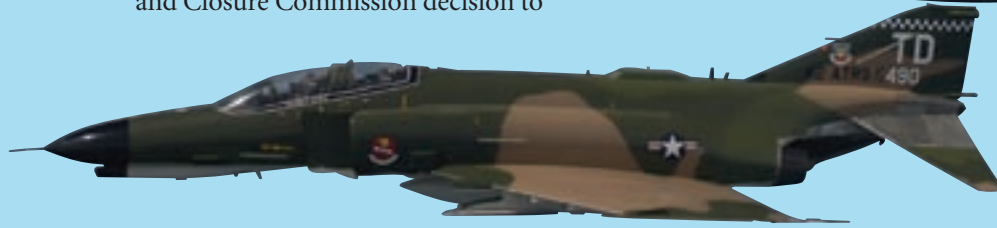
C: What might we find you doing on a typical Saturday morning or Sunday afternoon?

KE: You'd likely find me running. I generally run for 60 to 90 minutes on weekend days. On weekdays, I limit my run to about half that, mainly

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because of schedule constraints. I also like to fish and golf, but the last several years haven't given me much time to do either.

C: The recent Base Realignment and Closure Commission decision to



relocate DCMA Headquarters and proximate elements to Ft. Lee, Va., in 2010 has numerous ramifications for a significant segment of our workforce. Your insights, please, on softening the blow.

KE: Clearly, we need to understand what kind of challenges this poses for our people. Once we do that, Agency leadership will do everything within its power and authority to help all those affected. This includes those folks whose personal circumstances preclude their moving, as well as those folks who will be making the move. Obviously, we're going to help everyone through the relocation process, including ensuring that all personnel have the information they need to make an informed decision on whether to accept or decline the relocation.

C: What books or periodicals would we find on your coffee table?

KE: I've just finished *The World is Flat* by *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman. It's a post-September 11 look at the changing global markets and the disappearance of age-old boundaries and barriers that once fragmented the world economy. In terms of magazines, I read *Business Week* and *Government Executive*. For recreational reading, it's *Runner's World*.

(Above) As a Marine Corps pilot in the early 1970s, Mr. Ernst flew the Marine version of the F-4 Phantom fighter aircraft shown here, which are from the 82nd Aerial Target's Squadron at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla. (U.S. Air Force photo by Master Sgt. Michael Ammons)

C: What are some of your most memorable experiences as a Marine pilot?

KE: In general terms, two things stand out. The first is simply having had the opportunity to fly a high-performance aircraft in a variety of challenging environments. That was truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The second thing I most affectionately recall is the camaraderie within the squadrons I was attached to and the way everybody in those units worked together and supported each other in quest of a shared goal. I think the lessons learned in that environment, sometimes under dangerous circumstances, stay with you for a lifetime.

C: Are there times lately when you wish you were seated in a cockpit rather than at a desk?

KE: I suppose we all have days when we wish we were doing something else. But, after 23 years with DCMA, I can honestly say I know of no better organization to be a part of — or a better team to work with. Nor can I think of a more important mission than supporting the warrior as we do. I don't necessarily like sitting behind a desk all the time, and that's why I make it a point to get out and meet our people, our contractors and our customers. That's what makes this job such a good blend of fun and challenge.